RITUAL STRUCTURE

above account represents a fairly typical description of hell which one often hears in the village community. Through conversation, folktale, myth and legend these ideas are implanted fairly early into the minds of the village children, who start life with a fear of sin. But by the time they reach the age of undertaking wild adventures these fears are diluted, and the gruesome accounts of hell no longer hold their spell of horror over them. As old age approaches, bitter memories of failures and frustrations accumulate and the flesh does not have the energy to undertake fresh adventures; people slowly begin turning their attention to thoughts of life after death. As an illiterate informant pithily put it: 'While youth lasts, passions rule the actions of man. While property lasts, the glitter of gold makes a man blind. But in old age, man laments for what he did in his youth. With his dim vision, he can no longer see the maddening glitter of gold. Then his thoughts turn to religion.'

The concept of *dharma* is also important, as it covers all the phases of the human life-cycle and fixes several details of intra- and inter-group life. *Dharma* has often been translated by Western writers as 'religion', but this translation hardly conveys the original meaning. It will perhaps be more appropriate to describe it as '*the* way of life' or 'that which is right'. Acceptance of caste traditions and the general rules of piety, observance of fasts and feasts, rigidly following the norms governing the *rites de passage* and undertaking pilgrimages to places of worship or for bathing in holy rivers, can generally be said to constitute the *dharma* of the people. Special worship and rituals may be performed to attain certain special ends. It is through *dharma* that one can look forward to shaping one's destiny. The concepts of *pap* (sin) and *punya* (merit), and of ritual pollution are fundamental to the wider concept of *dharma*. Certain things must not be done by any member of the community irrespective of his caste because they are sinful. Murder, extreme cruelty and violence, and incest can be placed under this category. There are certain other things which must not be done by certain castes, or by certain individuals in particular conditions. Sexual relations or inter-dining with a person of lower caste will lead to impurity. A woman in menses or a family immediately after childbirth and death remains in a state of ritual impurity for a specified period. After certain bodily excretions such as those of fæces, urine or semen, a prescribed

who have images of deities bathe them every day and make offerings of food. They are often described as 'family' or household gods. The pictures are worshipped on the occasions of festivals. In the neighbouring village of Aliyabad there is a temple of Rama. Besides these, there are several shrines of the village goddesses. Eight of these are important. Two shrines are dedicated to Maisamma—the *Gadi Maisamma* protects the house and dependants of the village headman, and the *Katta Maisamma* lodged near the tank protects the village boundaries and presides over the agricultural prosperity of the community. Pochamma too has two shrines—one near the houses of the Vaddars and another between the living quarters of the Madigas and the Erkalas. The shrine of Dugamma near the village post office is also important. There is one shrine each for Mahakalamma, Mutyalamma, and Pinamma.

People eagerly take the opportunities of attending religious fairs, and of going to holy places for a dip in one of the sacred rivers. The major centre of pilgrimage in the Telugu-speaking parts of Hyderabad is Bhadrachalam where there is an old and impressive temple by the side of Godavari. Those who can afford to and have the inclination go to the other places of pilgrimage having country-wide recognition, such as Allahabad (Prayag) and Benares (Kashi).

3. THE RELIGIOUS YEAR

Three major types of religious ceremonies and festivals are observed in the community; family ceremonies, village ceremonies, and caste ceremonies. The Muslim section of the village population has its own family festivals and some communal ceremonies. As pointed out earlier, they participate with their Hindu neighbours in the observance of common village ritual.

HINDU FESTIVALS

Feasts and fasts form an important part of Hindu religious life. Festivals are spread evenly over the whole year. Apart from village ceremonies, agricultural ritual, and special worships organized by some castes individually, there are several festivals which may be observed by most Hindu families, irrespective of their caste

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natural and necessary. Only morons and cripples remain single. Though it is rare for people to renounce their home and property in old age, old men and women excessively attached to material goods come in for a good deal of criticism, and people often remark about them, 'Will they carry their wealth with them to the other world when they die?' It is at this time that their thoughts turn more to religion and to the destiny of their souls in the future life, and it is now that they generally undertake pilgrimages to holy places. In a sense the broad essentials of the philosophy of the *ashramas* can be said to permeate the life and thought of the Hindu villagers. The village Muslims share these social attitudes with their Hindu neighbours. With conversion to Islam they have changed their religious faith, but in the socio-cultural spheres of life they still continue to have more or less the same basic attitudes as the Hindus. In their family ethics and ideals the two groups demonstrate considerable similarity.

To the village people the necessity of both marriage and family is self-evident. It is necessary that the family line should be continued. A male heir must be left. An unmarried person past the marriage age is an object of pity. A couple without a son are unhappy. Childlessness and inability to produce a male child on the part of a woman often lead to a polygynous household. Marriage is regarded as essential among all the castes and social groups in the village. In a community of 2,494 persons, demographic survey reveals the presence of only two single persons—both women. One of these is a deaf-mute; the other has been a victim of epileptic fits from her childhood and has in addition the unenviable reputation of being a thief. For the clean-caste Hindus the continuity of the family line is necessary for a further reason. A male child must make a ceremonial offering of water to the spirits of his deceased parents and ancestors, without which their souls may not have peace. The untouchable castes as well as the semi-tribal groups also have this ritual in a modified form. The Muslims neither have this belief nor any attendant ritual, but they too share with the Hindus the sentiment against childlessness.

1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE FAMILY

The patrilineal and patrilocal elementary or joint family is the normal type of family unit met with in this part of rural India.